

Proper 23A: Matthew 22:1-14
Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. W. Terry Miller
October 15, 2023

Dressing for the Occasion

“The trouble with politicians today,” my friend said to me the other day, “is that they always tell us that if we vote for them things will get better. If only they'd tell us the truth - that the world is a dangerous place, that there are lots of wicked people trying to exploit each other, and that they will do their best to steer us through - *then* we might believe them.” Another friend chipped in, “Yeah, and that's what happens in the church too. We are so eager to tell people that God loves them, that everything's going to be all right, that God welcomes bad people as well as good ones - and then ordinary Christians have to live in the real world where people lie and cheat and grab what they want. What preachers tell people doesn't fit.”

I was reminded of this conversation as I read this parable from Matthew's Gospel. This parable often bothers people because it *doesn't* say what we want it to I mean, sure, it starts out nice, with God throwing a party open to everyone. And we like that story. We like that Jesus is saying that God is forgiving, that He lets everyone in, that He accepts everyone. It accords with how we think God should be. And so we are happy to stop reading right there. For, we'd rather not hear about judgment of the wicked, or about demanding standards of holiness, or about weeping and gnashing of teeth. Who picked this gospel lesson anyway? I mean, we've got enough on our plate, what with Ukraine and the Middle East in flames, a slow, uneven economic recovery, pandemics, rising crime and drug abuse, human trafficking and environmental degradation. Do we really need to hear more gloom and doom? How about something nicer, something more upbeat and comforting, something like “God will wipe away the tears from every eye”? Or “Come unto me all you that travail, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” But instead we get a story about a guy who gets thrown out for not wearing the right clothes to a wedding. Where's the comfort in that, where's the “good news” here?

Of course, there's more to this tale than a mere fashion faux pas. The story is in fact an elaborate allegory, a story in which everything has a deeper meaning. In this story, this parable, we see a picture of life in God's kingdom—only, it's not what we might expect, a bunch of people sitting around playing harps, but instead a joyous, elaborate party.

Jesus begins: There was a king who prepares a wedding feast for his son, and invites all the respectable and wealthy and important people to take part. Except that the respected, wealthy and important people don't come. They make light of the invitation, insulting the king. Some even harass the messengers who brought the invitations, abusing and killing them. Now, for Matthew's original listeners, they would have immediately thought of how, when the prophets of Old had foretold of a great feast God was preparing, their Jewish ancestors killed them, and how when John the Baptist told them to get ready, for the feast was almost set, they cut off his head. Like the king's original guests in the parable, God's chosen people had been invited to the feast—repeatedly—but there were few takers. They cared more about looking after their own plans and ambitions and desires, it seems. Actually, it was worse than that. For what most of us today don't appreciate is the political dimension of their response. You see, in ancient times, weddings and particularly royal weddings were about more than celebrating the happy couple, they were occasions for reaffirming political alliances. So by refusing to attend the

wedding, the invitees were doing more than snubbing the king, they were effectively declaring rebellion. This helps to explain the king's reaction—why he sent troops to kill the insurgents and burn their cities. Here too Matthew's audience thought of their fellow Jews. When the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 70 AD, it was like the king in this story, who laid siege to the city of ingrates.

But that wasn't the end of the story -- God sent out new messengers, the apostles, but this time he sent them to the highways and byways, to the wrong side of the tracks, to tell anyone and everyone to come to the party. And they came, in droves. Tax-collectors and "trailer trash," prostitutes and pimps, riff-raff, nobodies, the blind and lame, people who thought they'd been forgotten, that they didn't matter—they were thrilled to be invited, these prodigals and pushers, and they sat down right beside pious Jews who'd waited all their life for the feast.

So far what we have is a wonderfully welcoming, embracing and satisfying story—it's not the high society folks, the rich and powerful, but the poor and overlooked, the sinner and the scoundrel—who get to sit at God's table. How wonderfully "inclusive." The only problem is that this inclusivity presents its own problems, as it did in the early church. Those folks who arrived late to the party—the sinners and pagan unbelievers who had no history with the God of Israel but who came to faith in Christ—these folks acted as if God's graciousness gave them permission to live any way they wanted to. Meanwhile, the old-timers—the Jews who enjoyed a long history with God—they were still trying to figure out what it meant for them to live life free from the Jewish Law. Pretty soon, the early church had a discipline problem on its hands, as believers bellied up to God's table with no sense of what it meant for them to be there. As far as they were concerned, you showed up in God's presence however you wanted to show up, because Jesus had paid the bill forever. The invitation to the heavenly banquet was "come as you are." All were welcome and nothing was required: no fancy clothes, no special etiquette, no RSVP.

That apparently was what the underdressed wedding guest in the parable thought. Maybe he thought the king was lucky he came at all. Maybe he thought he was doing his host a favor by showing up and eating food that might otherwise have gone to waste. Maybe he figured, "If he wants me there, he can take me as I am." Whatever his reasoning, the fact is, he did *not* rise to the occasion. Instead, he demeaned it, by refusing to dress the part, refusing to put on the wedding robe like the other guests who'd been invited.

You may have heard the news last month about an attempt to lower the dress code rules in the US Senate. The move was an effort to accommodate a certain senator from Pennsylvania whose signature attire—hoodie sweatshirt and gym shorts—ran afoul of the Senate's rules that expected men to wear a suit and tie. Well, just after an initial relaxation of the rules, the Senate voted unanimously to put the rules back in place. Why all the fuss, you might think? It's just clothes. As one senator explained, "Dress code is one of society's standards that set etiquette and respect for our institutions." In other words, how we dress says a lot about what we think of those around us, about what we think is deserving of respect. In the same way we might understand that the underdressed guest's decision to wear street clothes to the wedding showed a lack of respect, his contempt for the occasion, and for the king.

But it's more than that. Like everything else in this story, the wedding robe has a deeper meaning. The robe, you see, is a symbol for a whole way of life—a way of life that honors the King, one that recognizes the privilege of being called into his presence, even if the invitation arrives at the last minute. The underdressed guest's mistake was not that he showed up in shorts. It was that he showed up short on righteousness and thought no one would notice, least of all the king.

Now, on the one hand, this is a story that addressed a very particular situation in the life of the early church, the incorporation of Gentiles, non-Jews, in the Jewish Christian community. On the other hand, the same sort of thing happens every week when we gather for worship. Everyone in Richmond was invited to be here today. But as you can see, some of them had other things to do. Some are on the golf course, and some are at work. Some are still in bed, and some have been up for hours anxiously checking their stock portfolio. But *we* are here—but not necessarily because we are better than they are. When the king's servants went out to recruit the second batch of guests, remember, they gathered everyone they could find, “both good and bad.” It just so happens that for our own reasons—some good, some bad—you and I decided to accept the invitation this morning.

And like the underdressed guest, some of us have rolled in here without thinking much about it. We've showed up with our spiritual shirttails hanging out, lining up at the buffet table as if no one could see the ways in which we haven't dressed for the occasion—how we have refused to change, refused to surrender our fears and resentments, refused to forgive, refused to share our wealth, to give out of the bounty God has given us. These are the “old clothes” we wear to the king's banquet—the worn and soiled clothes we prefer over the wedding robe of new life that God offers. And when we come into God's presence wearing these clothes, it's as hurtful to our host as wearing black to a wedding. It shows we do not appreciate the gift we've been given in being invited. As the preacher Tom Long puts it, “... to come into the church in response to the gracious, altogether unmerited invitation of Christ and then not conform one's life to that mercy is to demonstrate spiritual narcissism so profound that one cannot tell the difference between the wedding feast of the Lamb of God and happy hour in a bus station bar.”

The truth is, some Christians do not think it matters how we come to the party. Many churches today are happy for anyone they can get. Like the king's servants, they are out beating the bushes for anyone they can find to fill the wedding hall. Like politicians angling for a vote, they tell people what they want to hear—that God loves them—and they leave out the tough stuff, the call to repentance, to self-denial, to discipleship and service. They minimize the radical nature of the gospel, how it demands that each of us change, and instead act as if showing up is all that matters.

That is what the underdressed guest assumed, anyway. He thought the king was just looking for warm bodies, and he was happy to oblige. He was happy to eat the king's food and enjoy the king's music, if that would help the king out. That was just what he was doing too—standing next to the buffet in his stained shirt and ripped pants, tapping his foot to the band and popping another hors oeuvre into his mouth—when the king walked up to him and said, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” In other words, why are you not taking full part in the festivities? Why aren't you rejoicing like everyone else? You've been invited, so why aren't you acting like you belong here?” The guest had nothing to say. He was caught. He had shown by his attire that he didn't really want to be there. And so he was cast out.

As this parable makes plain, God is not just looking for warm bodies. God is looking for wedding guests, people who will rise to the occasion of honoring the King's Son. We can do that in jeans and sneakers, I think, as well as we can do it in suits and high heels. For the "clothes" God cares about are not made out of denim or silk, but rather the fabric of love and justice, of truth, mercy, and holiness. This is what we are expected to wear in the presence of the king. But if we refuse to put them on, and act the part, we are saying we don't really want to be at the party. We are saying that the invitation God gives us, we'll accept *on our terms*. On the other hand, to put on our 'wedding robes,' to don our best spiritual threads, is to acknowledge the significance of the occasion, to allow God's gracious invitation to transform our lives and to live fully in the joy of the Lord. Wearing our wedding garments, we cannot but look our eternal best. I don't know why we would want to wear anything else...